Difficult Knowledge and Children's Museums: Programming, Practices, and Principles across the United States and Canada

This report presents findings of a survey that examined the place of social studies (including representations of social difference and difficult knowledge) in programming, practices, and principles in children's museums across the United States and Canada.

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Respondents:

Between February-May 2024, 106 museum staff working in children's museums across the United States and Canada responded to the survey. Overall, 71% of respondents were in the United States and 29% in Canada.

The Big-Five: Key Findings

1. Programming

- Respondents most frequently identified their primary topic of programming as self-expression and/or exploration.

- Secondary programming topics more frequently included socio-historical issues and events.

- The topic of historical violence and colonialism was marginal in both Canadian and US programming.

- Programming topics varied by nation and were linked to primary target ages of child audiences.

- Museums programming for younger audiences (0-10 years) were significantly more likely to focus on self-expression.

- Museums that targeted older audiences (10+) were more likely to foreground broader topics.

2. Storytelling Practices

- Museum respondents reported using a variety of storytelling practices.

- Museums use storytelling primarily to activate children's curiosity and build empathy for diverse perspectives.

- Storytelling was least likely used to challenge colonial narratives.

- Testimonial practices were linked to socio-historic programming topics.

- Testimonial practices were also linked to inclusive strategies.

3. Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion (DEAI)

- 60% reported having an institutional statement on Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) and 22% reported having one that is in development.

- Size mattered. Large museums were more likely to have a DEAI statement than small museums.

- Age of target audiences was linked to museum DEAI statements.

4. Inclusive Strategies

- Inclusive strategies varied by nation.
- Critical race theory and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction were most often used to represent socio-historic programming topics.
- DEAI statements were not linked to programming topics.
- DEAI statements were correlated to the use of inclusive strategies.
- Museum respondents had access to multiple resources in support of DEAI work with children.
- Most museum respondents described these resources as very helpful or helpful.

5. Challenges

Despite DEAI statements and available resources, respondents reported several challenges, such as framing stories that are understandable to children, representing communities that are not one's own, involving Indigenous knowledge keepers, storytellers, and Elders, representing difficult topics or traumatic content, and involving storytellers from diverse and/or marginalized communities.

So What? Conclusions and Implications

This survey provided insights about the place of social studies – including diverse and sometimes difficult topics – in children's museums located in the US and Canada. A key theme running through the survey was the importance of children's museums in supporting children's self-expression and exploration as well as the value of storytelling practices to activate curiosity and promote empathy for diverse perspectives and experiences. Another key theme running through the findings was a tension between institutional commitments to Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion and concerns about children's development, including their perceived readiness to engage certain topics.

Overall, the findings document museums' efforts to address, challenge, and subvert the colonial legacies they also inherit. Findings also demonstrate a need for continuing efforts to diversify programming, particularly with younger children, including the need to diversify representation among museum educators, directors, and staff, and to create and care for communities of practice guided by principles of allyship and solidarity.

Recommendations

- Provide professional learning/workshops on issues and resources relating to the representation of social difference and difficulty with children;
- Invite continuing reflection on social positionality in relation to museum work; include professional development on self-reflection, solidarity, and allyship;
- Diversify staffing;
- Support the integration of counter-stories in museum programming and practices by sharing examples, resources, and models across borders, regions, and communities of museum educators and school affiliates;
- Include children in programming – particularly from marginalized communities.